and flashing light behind the eyes,
she no longer keeping out the world
but meeting its sudden music inside. *(Silences: 32)*

The second excerpt is from “Shards”, in which the poet gathers up “the shards of the day”, as in her notebook,
to find
that, in running
your fingers down
the vagabond day,
you have conducted
a message to the earth,
an alignment of murmurs,
a shock,
a poem. *(Dream: 53)*

**Post-marital triage**


**FINUALA DOWLING**

Nearly ten years have passed since the publication of Leon de Kock’s *Bloodsong*. In that first volume of poetry he tentatively and touchingly explored newly-acquired fatherhood in lullabies and other nighttime vigil poems, occasionally contrasting robust stories of his own Troyeville youth with the more refined routines of his infant children.

The title poem of his 1997 collection warned a temptress against meddling with family bonds (“the laws of blood’s fortress”). Commitment to the sheer industry of domestic life was everywhere evident: the poem “Night”, for example, defined love as “the chiseled labour of years/ / the giving of everything to children/ /until it feels there’s nothing, nothing/ but a residue.”

The first section of *gone to the edges*, De Kock’s latest collection, documents the death of marriage and its devastating aftermath. Many of the poems are triumphs of linguistic economy: brief, concentrated fiery bursts of emotional intensity.

This admirable succinctness derives in part from a deep suspicion of words, wordiness and cerebral game-playing that lies at the heart of the volume. The marriage that has ended so cataclysmically was, after all, a match between two lovers who

… both loved words
words like stones
in the palms of our hands

In this poem (“Wife, departed”) the marriage of two intellects is imagined as a high-wire circus act. The couple’s mutual love for language is so perfectly balanced that it reaches the level of a performance. In a delightful echo of Ferlinghetti’s “constantly risking absurdity”, the husband-and-wife acrobatic team finds that

We could play with words
toss them about lightly
always catching their fall
in that net of our mutual intelligence.

“Wife, departed” seems at first to offer an unexpectedly moving elegy for a marvelous literary kinship. In the midst of “the bastards!”, the carving knife, the “purple gouge” and the repeated cries of “Fuck Oedipus!” that characterize the poems around it, “Wife, departed” comes across as a sudden aperçu of tenderness; we are lulled into a briefly smug thought along the lines: “Ah, at last the poet realizes how great his loss is and how sad.”

But like so many De Kock poems, this one is sprung with a trap, or perhaps several traps. We are coaxed into taking sides when the speaker asserts that the wife has departed taking the dictionary with her, “the touchstone of our minds”. Without the high intellect represented by the dictionary, the house becomes “cave-like”, pre-literary.
Then we are tricked a second time, the poem now swinging back and forth along its own inner divorce pendulum of accusation and counter-accusation. The speaker discovers that the wife has not in fact taken the dictionary with her. His wordplay here (“our tome/our tomb of words”) acts a brilliant reminder of how deceptive language can be: death trap rather than safety net. But he refuses to allow that leaving the dictionary is an act of generosity. Quite the reverse: she has been one to hold back, he tells us bitterly; she has always refrained; this is the very crux of the problem:

And I was reminded
how sweet
how bittersweet
is the tang of your reticence.

To understand this dynamic of reticence versus desire, we must go back further in time to the marriage itself, to the poems placed as a retrospective in the second half of the book. In the poem “I must go now” we find the speaker drawn like a somnambulist or slave to his marital bed. The poem is surreal, dreamlike, and the speaker is enchanted, without volition:

I must go now
into the well of the sudden night
where my wife lies, out of sight.

She is physically out of sight, around a corner, but she is also “out of sight” in the sense of embodying a mystique, in the sense of holding within herself the carefully constructed and eternally unknowable principle of femininity to which he is inexorably drawn like Keats’s doomed knight-at-arms:

down the passage, to the left
my darkness awaits me, like a cleft.

This poem represents an astonishing five-line condensation of a marriage with its profound secrets and intense, tantalizing sexuality. Wonderfully ambiguous, the “cleft” is more than sexual; it is sublime, containing echoes of the stalwart Christian hymn, “Rock of Ages”.

The poet had already confronted his own enthrallment in Bloodsong:

You want to know why
there is no poem for you
Sweet suffering god,
how am I supposed to
empty these moments
onto the trackless path?

All the miles I walk
after you, after you
my head is bowed
to thoughts of our
several selves, to my
self’s undoing in yours.

Now, in gone to the edges, the speaker wrests his volition back. Non serviam, he declares; and two poems begin with blunt refusal and resistance, “I will not” . . . “I will not”.

Some of these poems menace; some of them snarl: viewer discretion is advised. The bridges back to their love have been blown up; this book is an act of post-marital triage.

gone to the edges construes the death of a marriage in apocalyptic terms. An unstoppable flood has sent the speaker to the edges and in fact beyond. The known landscape and its pleasant horizons are obliterated; now, sickeningly, life is lived without handrails, compass points or even gravity.

The title poem brilliantly captures this first moment of coming up for air, groping for balance. The feeling is one of vertigo. There is nowhere to stand, the surfaces have been blasted away:

and now I’m half-falling
half-standing,
crouching to let my blood
catch my head.
Yet even from this clumsy, nausea-inducing perspective, the speaker recalls the exquisite allegory of sexual union: a dance where space and intimacy are carefully negotiated:

deep in the distance they can bear
deep in the touch they can afford

He knows only too well the range of desire, its gamut from “that mouthwetted foretaste” of anticipation to the last stifling gasp of surfeit, “the mouth-stopped excess”.

In the last lines of this poem is the crux, the paradox that de Kock keeps returning to: after the deluge, the near-death experience:

we have no choice
but to recover
and rediscover
breath.

The word “recover” is beautifully deceptive here. De Kock has no truck with silver-lined clouds: there is no comforting rebirth to be awaited following the bloody battle of two spouses. It is not “recover” in the sense of “get better” that he means, but the delayed phrase, “recover ... breath”. Elsewhere the poet imagines this barest minimum of what is required for life as the human pulse with its simple alternation of “systole ... diastole.”

To reiterate, gone to the edges perceives the end of marriage as a flood, an apocalypse. Grimly, this poet who describes himself the “scientist of [his] moods” explores the possibilities of his metaphor. The flood sweeps away everything in its wake, but not cleanly: “After the flood/ The residue”. A poem entitled “The endlessness” gives us this residue as it dries out and hardens in the sun, glinting and glittering like a weapon ready to cut again.

You can’t sluice a marriage away. The drains back up with accumulated “rotted rich mulch” and “the gutters never work,” after all.

In “They dug up your garden” there’s a real plumbing problem. The wife’s signature flower bed has to be dug up by “plumbers./ shitworkers” (“kaksoekers” in the accompanying Afrikaans poem) in their mundane work of unblocking the pipes. They find:

Deep under your roses
Your white radiance
...  
A stinking trench
Just below your line of defence
Your icy beauty
It was always there.

Here is the perfect objective correlative for the poet’s feelings of repugnance as he stands helpless before what has had to be done and what has had to be revealed: the sewers of marriage, its “ruptures”.

There is shape to this collection, there is pattern: it is not a jumble, a mixed bag of previously unpublished poems. gone to the edges has wholeness, integrity, moving from the disorientation of the opening poem to the grudging solidity of “Manifesto” (the poem that ends the first section). Here, in a rare moment of stillness, he gives up “the bland comforts of home/ and marriage/ the comforts that never were” – that little heaven of domesticity – in exchange for a new Promethean persona who looks “around the curve/ of this disenchanted horizon”.

This is an impressive and memorable volume in which de Kock pushes himself to emotional limits while keeping a sure hand on the tempering techniques of his craft.

Pharmakon delight


NICK MEIHUIZEN
Michael Cope is the son of the artist Lesley Cope and the writer Jack Cope. He is a goldsmith by trade, but with this book has become one of my favourite South African authors. “A Meditation on Memory”, the subtitle reads. How does one reflect, intently and at length, on the phenomenon of memory? How does the mirror reflect itself? Theoretical texts on autobiography emphasize the inherently flawed nature of the genre, because of, for instance, the unpredictable interactions among remembered reality, the narratives of others involved in one’s life, and the imagination.

Proust invokes a past with such precision and in such detail that he needs over 3000 pages to record it. With what degree of seriousness should we take this tireless, seemingly infinitely elaborated reconstruction of a past? Does adherence to the dictates of external objective reality matter in the face of such an elaborate construction, which, whatever its basis, is substantially real in itself?

Cope is fully aware of the challenges and the pitfalls associated with a memoir, but avoids tortuous questioning in order to provide, rather, in lucid and intelligent prose, a 280-page record of the people, places and events which impressed themselves on his consciousness during his early years. At one point he writes of the “tapestry of tales” that must underlie the vast stretches of time which we try to describe according to discrete, unitary categories (186), and this is a useful image to show what he himself has created. He has stitched together a highly readable anatomy of personal memory – guided by a seemingly randomly-chosen string of keywords inspired by spam-dodgers on the Internet – a tapestry of personal narratives, quotations from Jack and Lesley Cope’s diaries, writings by ancestors, illustrations by Lesley, extracts from parts of a taped conversation with Albie Sachs, images from the Internet, and scanned images.

The effect is of a family-album or scrap-book (or even home-page) packed with wide-ranging traces of human sensibility. Here are pictorial and verbal images of Lesley and Jack Cope (Lesley is the implied subject of the book), of siblings, of ancient Romans, of elephants, of gurus, of pressed ceilings, of lathed seals, of beach cottages, of seaweed, of Venus’s loins, of rockets. The verbal commentary on the pictures is interesting and informed, sober and balanced, and so exhibits a finely honed critical sensibility attuned to the personal past, which reminds me more of Karel Schoeman (of Die laaste Afrikaanse boek) than JM Coetzee (of Boyhood and Youth), though Cope is more obviously humanly forthcoming than either of these two writers.

The scale is vastly different, but perhaps a comparison with Robert Burton’s gently wise and erudite Democritus Junior would be more appropriate – yet this is to apply a scholar’s pretensions to a work which imparts a sense of the opposite. The book is certainly erudite, ranging from Phaedrus to Pliny, from cabbage-like fossilized “cellular cooperatives” to the “derivates of ergot” that led to the discovery of LSD; but it is so without drawing attention to the mere display. It is democratic in its erudition, in the way the results of an Internet search (on which many of these beads of information in the book are based) are democratic; the secret is, of course, you have to know what to look for before you search and what to make of it once you find it, and Cope does.

Drawing on recollections and writings of Jack and Lesley (among others) the work is more than the product of an individual writer, though at times Cope avoids using the still accessible memories of family members in order to give personal individual recollection (with all of its needs, apprehensions, perspectives, impositions) its due. As an armature for parental private writings, the book casts light on an important moment in Southern African literature, when Jack Cope’s friends included Uys Krige, Jan
Rabie, and, of course (her work treated with surprisingly withering but ultimately just critical acumen by Michael), Ingrid Jonker. According to Lesley’s judgment Jack is rather a cold presence, usually distanced from her and the family; reading Jack Cope’s own thoughts at the time, this judgment must be somewhat tempered by the fact that he was clearly muse-struck, dedicated to his writing, locked in his own mind much of the day. If only these two could have read each other’s diaries.

Michael Cope’s animus against his parents’ subsequent partners, Ingrid Jonker and Anton Luitingh, is the focus of a general animus against the Afrikaner, perhaps understandable in the case of one growing up under the increasingly restrictive, generally chilistine and demonstrably pathological rule of the National Party, but the prejudice exhibited here nevertheless creates for me the one area of discomfort in the book. However, the emotional complex that is revealed by it is coloured by carefully scrutinized and pondered elements of individual psychology: Cope’s feelings for his parents; his yearning for their reunion; his present clear awareness of the conflicting love and jealousy of a young child.

A repeated refrain of the book is the word “pharmakon”, used in two senses, as in Plato’s Phaedrus – that is, as a medicine and as a poison. Pharmakon in its first sense modulates into logos, the spoken word, but also the living word of literature such as that written by Jack Cope. Later in the book logos blends into the living word of spiritual practice, to give a point of entry to his mother’s involvement (and to an extent his own) with the satsangi movement. As elsewhere in the book Cope is not afraid to level criticism where he feels it is necessary, and his criticism in the case of spiritual organizations is, once more, just. He criticizes the absolutism of such movements, which turns every utterance of a master into dogma, creating an impression very different from that created by the masters themselves, who are generally remarkable people who approach every problem in life as unique, not as a case-study for the rigid application of rules.

Cope’s simultaneous respect for these practices is evident. His own particular practice now is a type of martial art centred in kata, various “forms” the body learns in achieving perfected sequences of movement. “Martial art” is too restrictive a term, as what Cope practises involves “theatre, martial tradition” and elements of “Zen and Shingon meditation” (42–3). Though the perfection achieved through the forms is “beyond thought and word” (44) one senses something of a kata-like balance and fluency in his writing, “owned and inhabited, alive and present”, as he says of the forms (43); the “passage of intuition and intellection hand in hand”, as Beckett writes of Proust (1983: 64).

A fairly typical example of Cope’s associative approach (which might be thought of as his use of verbal sequences which make up intellectual forms) occurs under the discussion of “Regulus” (170–2). Here he begins with the idea of saintly relics, knits this to the book’s recurrent weave of the memorial (as relics carry memories of the dead), then to his reiterated idea that texts get significance from surrounding contexts of meaning. Scotland, his ancestors’ home, is another recurring motif of the book, and provides another related context, when we learn that it was St Regulus, bishop of Patras, who brought the relics of St Andrew to Scotland, and found a church in St Andrew’s memory in fairly close proximity to Cope’s various ancestral lands. After scrupulously presenting another view as to when and where St Regulus came to Scotland (if he indeed did), Cope sets up a remarkable conjunction which has the effect of a firm disjunction. In 1955, at the time when his mother was writing the diary entries recorded by Cope in this book, “the Americans produced the first of their range of nuclear-armed cruise missiles, the Regulus” (171).
The disjunctive force of the juxtaposition of saint and missile takes effect when we realize that the Regulus was the first nuclear-armed cruise missile, able to obliterate all national, familial and religious traces from the face of the earth. Cope’s parents were originally Communists, and how different from the Regulus was the Soviet Sputnik, launched on 4 October 1957, in shape, intention and signification: “It seemed, to me, to be a vindication of Communism, of my parents and their friends, and of the world of freedom and equality for which, as I understood it, they yearned and strove. The satellite sent a signal to the world below. ‘Beep beep,’ it said: ‘beep beep beep.’” (171). But this at once simple, playful and profound observation does not complete the entry. Cope meditates on all the subsequent cruise-missiles, fortunately never used, “the Polaris, Poseidon, Tomahawk and many others” (171-2), and concludes that the Regulus “has now attained the status of a relic” (172). An unholy relic. What a moment in the text. Cope’s final paragraph recreates the infernal hold over us, at the time, of the cold war: “The possibility of instantaneous nuclear obliteration pervades my life as far back as I can probe it, along with the icon of the mushroom-shaped cloud, menacing, in black and white. All of the characters in this story felt intermittently that their cities could become cities of the dead. Wherever we were, we knew or suspected that we were in the cross-hairs, that there were bombs in Russian and American submarines aimed especially at us” (172). The section, exemplative of the book in its entirety, is brief but packed with significance, like a lyric. This is prose which uses poetic effects in order to clarify living perceptions in the present moment, not in order to plant a seed filled with condensed, invisible life which only germinates after seasons in the dark semi-conscious, as is the case with so much contemporary poetry.

Poetry? Prose? Scrap-book? Home-page? Sal-magundi? Anatomy of Memory? It is difficult to categorize such a book, but what is far more important is its effect on the reader, and here a simple word will suffice: “delight”.

**Work cited**


**Mutual implications**


**ERIK FALK**

*Versions of Zimbabwe* is, as the subtitle states, an anthology on literature and culture in and from Zimbabwe. Edited by Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac, it brings together 15 articles, divided into five sections, by many prominent scholars in the field. It is an ambitious compilation. The scope is wide, though not quite as wide as the subtitle might suggest. The emphasis is on literature; with the exception of Jane Bryce’s article on *Flame*, the source material is in almost all cases the written word. This focus, however, is deliberately inclusive. The writing examined includes a number of genres, with articles ranging from discussions of autobiography/memoir to poetry and from historical to contemporary texts. “Culture”, then, does not refer primarily to the number of artistic media studied; it signals instead the approach taken to the material: the attention to the social, political and cultural role of literature in Zimbabwe, and the interest in how politically and socially loaded notions such as history, memory, identity, and nation are constructed in various discursive forms. As the
editors say in their introduction, the overall objective of the book is to investigate how literature “may be related to Zimbabwean history and politics” (xiv).

Perhaps the most obvious example of the mutual implication of culture and national politics, discussed by Terence Ranger in his essay, is the way Zimbabwe has become a society under “rule by historiography” (217). While accounts of the past have long been used to create a sense of cultural and social identity, under the present regime, a particular and particularly narrow vision of history has been wed to government politics. This recycling and transformation of liberationist slogans and notions is called “patriotic history” and serves to justify the country’s disastrous politics (220). Cultural representations, then, are at the very centre of political development. This exploitation of history for current purposes is all the more worrying because previous scholarship has largely failed to perceive the direction the country has been heading in – and the violence that would ensue. What is called for, the editors state, is a “re-assessment” of cultural practices as well as research that addresses this blindness (xiv). The revaluation is not only intended as an alternative description of the current state of crisis. It is also meant to be an intervention in the field of cultural production. Much research, the editors argue, has gone along with assumptions dear to the present government, such as the fundamental connection between land and identity. One clearly stated objective, therefore, is the showcasing of “new and untried approaches to Zimbabwean writing” (xiv). The will to combine critical analysis and performance is not unique. Indeed, most texts written in what should perhaps no longer be called postcolonial cultural studies share a similar political and critical impulse. In many cases, however, this risks leading to inflated ideas about the subversive power of culture, or the influence of academic scholarship upon the development of society as a whole. In Versions of Zimbabwe, too, the risk is there in tacit assumptions about the impact of research, but the expressed statement, the current political background, and the focus of the essays convey a real sense of urgency and intention. Something is indeed at stake in this text. Ranka Primorac, it may be noted, has previously shown this commitment to placing culture or creative fiction at the centre of political debate. In an article co-written with Stephen Chan, she has used creative fiction as a resource for envisioning a new approach to the issue of land in Zimbabwe. Against what the authors term the “fetishization of land” in official political rhetoric and cultural production, writers like Chenjerai Hove and Yvonne Vera in their fiction develop notions of land as to be “traversed” rather than spiritually lived (Chan and Primorac 2004, 74–75).

The urgency and interventionist agenda makes up for the (inevitable) vagueness of the objective. The “relation” between culture and politics, art and the social context is an extremely difficult one, and the anthology does not, of course, give a general answer to how it should be understood. The different essays instead work out – and out of – different assumptions, and construe the relation in different ways, sometimes implicitly so. Preben Kaarsholm’s opening text, for instance, broadly discusses the ways in which literature has articulated experiences of the liberation war, independence and its aftermath. He argues that fiction was at first slow to react and was mostly celebratory in kind. From the late 1980s, however, creative literature has developed complex and interrogating characterizations and attitudes to the war and its effects. Echoing and conversing with previous works, this development has, alongside theatre and some newspapers, managed to create local public spheres that in spite of pressures and intimidations have allowed for assessment and revaluation of patriotic accounts. Rather than theoretically elaborating the nature of the relation between art/culture
and social context, Kaarsholm usefully offers an empirical account in order to measure its constructive potential in the specific situation.

Kaarsholm’s article sets the stage nicely for what is to come, and the texts that follow stretch from detailed readings of individual writers, over comparisons, to genre surveys. The contributions by Annie Gagiano, Caroline Rooney, and Lene Bull-Christiansen are examples of the former. Gagiano writes about Dambudzo Marechera’s self-critical yet affirmative thematization of the war experience, hinging upon the notion that good writing, and not only first-hand experience, will be crucial to articulating the complexity of the war. Rooney sees in Chenjerai Hove a poet with a distinctly modernist poetics struggling against the “corruption of language” by its political use, and Bull-Christiansen investigates Yvonne Vera’s challenging of nationalist versions of history through imaginative rewritings of historically defining events (57). Her imaginative revisions of history not only disturb previous renderings by opening them up to new meanings, they also include previously excluded events. Thus, *The stone virgins*, Vera’s last novel, centres on a series of atrocities committed during a government campaign against dissenters in the 1980s. Called the *Gukurahundi*, the campaign has been more or less completely absent from official accounts of the country’s recent past. Vera’s representation teases out the complexity, as well as the gendered nature, of the conflict in which civilians were squeezed between guerrillas and government special forces.

Ashleigh Harris, Anthony Chennells, and Robert Muponde present fine instances of comparisons between different works of fiction that are concerned with the writing of childhood. Harris’ analysis brings out the tensions in writing one’s younger self “at home” – a tension that exists between the experiencing self and the writing self, as well as between different written selves – in two contemporary white memoirs. White identity “at home” in Zimbabwe, she concludes, constantly negotiates pressures of national and racialized politics, a history of being settler-colonizers, of mixed senses of belonging and displacement. White identity is the shuttling movement between these poles, “never settling comfortably in any singular or fixed position” (117). Chennells discusses the development of self-writing in Rhodesian white writers like Ian Smith, Peter Godwin, and Doris Lessing. His readings map a development from the coincidence, in Smith, of national and personal self in the genre of romance to Lessing’s intense awareness of the difficulty of representing the past in writing. Interestingly, Chennells connects his historical investigation to the current political state in a discussion on the tensions between ethnic self and nation in autobiographical writing. Whereas white settler writing like Smith’s was part of a dominant discourse, the situation has now changed: “The current dominant version of history within Zimbabwe is the self-serving historical memory of Zimbabwe’s ruling party, ZANU(PF), and insofar as the historiography that informs white memories opposes it, in contemporary Zimbabwe white autobiography has become an ethnic narrative” (133). Muponde approaches the topic from another angle, reading two novels that represent childhood in wartime as implicated in a development of national identity.

The “new approaches” that the book is devoted to come out more in some respect than in others. The bridging of the divide between black and white writing, and between English and Shona/Ndebele literature is a good intention. Several of the chapters discuss black and white writing together and thus manage to contribute to the editors’ objective of working “towards putting an end to the needless segregation of Zimbabwean literary traditions demarcated by “race”” (xviii). Still, only one chapter discusses literature written in any other language than English. Mickias Musiyiwa and Tommy Mashakayile-Ndlovu’s article on the construction
of the Shona and Ndebele identity seems to be directed primarily towards an audience that – like me – is not familiar with the literature and concludes rather blandly that, with the exception of some overtly ethnic-nationalist writers, the majority of Shona and Ndebele writers producing from 1950s to today have “celebrate[d] and promote[d] a broader Zimbabwean identity” (88). Had they written in confidence that the readers knew the works they were discussing, perhaps they could have presented more provocative results. This notwithstanding, several of the articles seem indeed to carve out new directions, or at least new emphases, in research. Sarah Nuttall’s article on the importance of the urban space in Yvonne Vera’s fiction, and her Deleuzian theoretical framework, pursues a new trajectory in Vera criticism. And Maurice Vambe’s attack against what he calls the “poverty of theory” in Zimbabwean cultural history and analyses – that is the dominance of sociological approaches to the field – seems equally to open up new avenues of investigation (89).

As is the case with most anthologies, the division of texts is in Versions of Zimbabwe not always entirely persuasive. While the section on “childhood, memory and identity” contains articles that relate closely to one another and closely circle a theme, the section on “text and violence” and “questions of lack and language” more resemble ad-hoc solutions. This is a minor criticism; indeed, though sub-division is necessary for the reader to have some chance of orientation through the 260 pages of the book, what is most striking is the consistency with which the anthology asks the question of how literature and culture can function in a context of political bankruptcy. The leakage of the themes and motifs from one section to another becomes as much proof of the difficulty of organizing the texts in discrete categories as the coherence of the anthology overall.

The anthology is no beginner’s guide to Zimbabwean cultural studies; neither is it an ordinary reference book. Nevertheless, the range of the essays, their individual achievements, and their compound result make it a very valuable contribution to the literary-cultural terrain of the country.

Works cited

Versed in country things

NICK MEIHUIZEN

The epigraph for this book is the final stanza of Robert Frost’s wonderful “The need of being versed in country things”, the last two lines of which, reflecting on the burnt-down farmhouse which sheltered the phoebes or flycatchers, read: “One had to be versed in country things / Not to believe the phoebes wept”. In Morrissey’s book, the link between human and non-human life seems to be affirmed by one who is versed in country things. Sounding Frost’s note as an epigraph, Morrissey announces a connection with it, a like-mindedness, but also a re-examination of the notion in order to weigh its truth. Morrissey offers the poetic fruits of his experience in the face of Frostian (on the face of it) disbelief, though Frostian disbelief appears to exist in tension with a strong will not to be versed in country things. After all, if there was “nothing sad” for the birds in having the farmhouse burn down, why should they yet be seen to “rejoice in the nest they kept” – clearly, from Frost’s point of view, they participate in emotions recognizable by human beings. And,
not to be too whimsical one hopes, is it not a short step from seeing phoebe, the flycatcher, as “Phoebe”, a human girl with the Grecian substance and bearing inherent in her name? Phoebe was also a name for Artemis, who held sublunary life beneath her sway — the implications are evident. There is continuity, there is unity in experience. Morrissey is no more sure of country common sense than is Frost, and so can likewise evoke the mystery of this continuity and unity.

Despite the Frostian epigraph, Morrissey, a fine Yeats scholar too, does not align himself with poetic tradition in any obvious way. Not for him the “ancient salt” of Yeatsian form (Yeats, 1961: 522); his voice is personal, confessional, almost informal, though one should not underestimate the care which goes into structuring this informality. It is the structuring of an aphoristic vision, which clinches observations taken from life, compresses them within a few syllables, makes dense the matter put before us, and makes us aware that to achieve this density, this distillation, years of experience must have been slowly filtered through the mind for a long time. As readers will find, this type of linguistic serviceability, this “Dog Latin” of a sort, functions beyond the human sphere (I will not spoil the reader’s treat by saying anything more about the book’s eponymous poem).

Take the very first poem of the book, “Settler Country” (1). “A poem about the Eastern Cape with a political comment”, one thinks, and indeed the first incident depicted (politically inflected) is set in the Eastern Cape. But even this incident, about “an APLA commando” which “took out the bar at the Highgate Hotel”, is framed by the ominous crashing of “a coucal” into the speaker’s car, widening the lens of concern from the start. By the time we read the second section of the poem about “bickering sunbirds”, we realize that “settler country” is a notion which underlies all of existence: “—a fight over territory; / the old story”. What on earth does not comprise a border of something, whether among European farmers, Khoi valleys, Xhosa cattle, ants, even “blades of grass clashing for light”? While telling of a universal condition, however, the poem also questions issues of land ownership and land rights, as well as an unthinking acceptance of the opprobrium attached to being a “settler”.

It is the last two lines of the poem which share with the aphoristic density of much else in this book. Aphorisms, of course, teach, and there is something didactic about Morrissey’s life lessons couched in aphoristic form, but this sort of didacticism, even if we bear in mind Keats’s abhorrence, is powerfully poetic because of the verbal grace that is achieved in its percolation of experience and understanding:

no inch of land that’s not a border — settler country.

Morrissey’s Frostian unity between human and natural sensibility sometimes takes on paradoxical forms, as in “Mother Africa” (3), a poem which celebrates the Schotia afra, commonly known as the karoo boer-bean tree. This is as powerful a political commentary on South Africa as any rendered in more explicit terms. The sympathy between humankind and nature seems to make these particular trees flower through summer and winter at the birth of the new South Africa, “as if the earth were rejoicing”. But in another twist of the political kaleidoscope we view a different image, from the perspective of those who have lost power, the “heirs of men who took horse agin Kitchener”, and “the trees wept blood without ceasing”. The conclusion of the poem affirms the type of empathy questioned by Frost, though the scale is continental. The specific narrative transforms the cliché of “mother Africa”: “Africa has a heart that knows us all / — despite everything.” That “— despite everything” intrigues me: it is a throwaway generalization from one point of view, but from
another tells of the type of support and forgiveness one only finds in a mother’s breast, and so while evoking a multitude of sins also seals the notion of reconciliation, of redemption. Of Mother Africa.

This is what Morrissey’s poetry can achieve on the level of individual words and expressions, a shifting of the verbal commonplace into another register entirely. Another good example is to be found in “Friar Lawrence Meditates” (10), which tells of the need to pick certain plants at the right time, “at the right phase of sun and moon”, for them to have curative properties; “a few hours off beam” and they will be impotent. The “off beam” in conjunction with the phases of sun and moon is just the right touch to suggest moving beyond the range of the beams of heavenly influence; a colloquialism takes on a new life. And in “Last Spark” (29) where a dying shrew seeks warmth from the speaker’s sleeve, is the play of words not extended by an implicit modulation (a sequence in a dog Latin-type declension) from “tinder” into “tender”?: “– just a last spark’s ache for tinder”.

The poem which follows “Mother Africa”, “Field Report” (4), also questions being complacently versed in country things. The narrative is about a Parks Board employee, who is annoyed by the sentimental field reports of his young colleagues:

They can’t see a cheetah pull down an impala
without telling me
the impala was afraid!
It’s a different species
– you don’t know what an impala feels

The response of “a young man fresh from the bush” affirms the strength of intuition: “He wouldn’t know, would he? / – poor bastard!” What is at issue is not so much what is true or false about the case, but either an extension or a withholding of common sympathy for life on earth. I think the Frost poem, even while questioning sentimentalism, also affirms the power of extending sympathy beyond the merely human. What is true or false cannot be known in scientific terms, whatever being versed in country things tells us; which does not prevent us from being absorbed by what is “palpably unknown” (4), as Morrissey puts it in “As far as it goes”.

Extended sympathy can also be expressed as a practical empathy not based on imagined or real mirrorings. One quite often gets the sense that Morrissey needs this empathy, it gives him energy and life, as in “Without them” (5), a poem about acrobatic, “zippy” starlings:

and I can take their life for my own.
I’d not have that zest without them.

“Proxies” (5) also tells of our complementary need for animal life, for this life’s responses to what should move us but perhaps doesn’t. A samango monkey “barks” with “shock” as the speaker feels a “great pine”:

one of my proxies
(hawk, cat, snake, hound)
that think
where I’ve no mind of my own.

But then Morrissey, who hears the “first phrase” of Brahms’s “Lullaby” (6) in a cuckoo’s call (“In our nature”), also questions our tendency to impose “meanings”, bringing us back to the initial Frostian tension of the book:

but it’s in our nature to find echoes in unlike things,
make meanings that are quite unnatural.

This is very different from other poems already mentioned, but especially from the affirmation in one not yet mentioned, “The Eland’s Gift” (19–20), where the speaker is “watched”, “un-moving” by an old Eland cow: “no-one has ever seen me that clearly”. This is surely an assumption of the egotistical sublime, the self in all
things which is recognized by all things; a *negation* of being versed in country common-sense? The Renaissance scholar, Thomas M Greene, tells of how poems enact “the way a sensibility defines itself through performances of perception” in order to “dramatize the speaker’s effort to unify an emergent self which is always struggling to acquire coherence” (Greene 2002: 15). He quotes Emerson: “Since every thing in nature answers to a moral power, if any phenomenon remains brute and dark it is because the corresponding faculty in the observer is not yet active” (ibid.). Morrissey’s shiftings are defining “performances of perception” that spurn simplistic “coherence”, but that indeed “answer to a moral power”, where everything that lives is holy. There is a “faculty” in him which is “active” at such moments as in “The Eland’s gift”, which illuminates experience, and where the distinction between the observer and the observed does not matter. Again, whether the speaker deludes himself or not in writing “no-one has ever seen me that clearly” is beside the point. Poems such as “In our nature” and “Habit” (22–3) qualify his statement anyway, just as Frost’s inconsistencies regarding the emotions of the phoebes qualify the final two lines of “The need of being versed in country things”. The affirmation of the “moral power” is what is important.

This “moral power” has its darker side. This we see in “Maureen” (16–17), and especially in “To be” (12), a poem through which we move like flies in marmalade, so difficult is it for the speaker “to be” in it. The poem retains much of its mystery, but in the end it is clear that the speaker’s choice is “to be”, as a “sun” which could easily slip back, it seems, is “pulled . . . up, slowly” by the speaker. The denizen of nature against which the speaker measures himself in this case is a “crow”, once expectantly hovering on the edges of the “not to be”. The final expression of “empathy” here is wry, reflecting (from albeit opposing positions) a shared sense of the passing of the “not to be”:

and when a crow creaked up the hill
to curse me for not being the roadkill he’d expected
I had to admire his empathy.

Not a predictable empathy, but reflective of a pure morality based on the choice of the moment and its consequences as they occur to a stripped consciousness.

There is stripping, a paring away, of the complementary need previously referred to in “Progress” (14):

I loved hadidahs once
for Thoth’s sake
— the Egyptian mystery;
now, a pair at sunset
— soon to be lovers –
is enough;
someday
just blood beating the wind
will do.

The hieroglyphic mystery of the birds is peeled away to reveal the present emotional sense of the birds as lovers; further, the poem anticipates a future where biological reality is reduced to essence and force.

But the poem of empathy (so to speak) which touches me most is “Homo ludens” (18), which describes a crab (an extreme embodiment of the otherness of nature perhaps) obviously “playing” with a leaf. The description is light and sure, and full of life. Here is the crab playing with the leaf:

pouncing, worrying it with his claws,
letting it go in mock disdain
to bob and eddy round again
— till back he’d dance, spring
like a kitten in a high freak of fancy:

This exemplary, minutely observed and subjectively involved description contrasts quite shockingly with the subsequent human perspective: “seeing that strange, brittle frame and
stalked, / stony eyes”. But then there is a conscious decision to return to crab world and though the terms are (necessarily) human, something fine is achieved:

– how do you look from a crab's head, call that terribly simple scene home?

This is enough for me. The final lines (although the “seeping” of “something warmer” is admirable) make explicit what the poem already embodies:

but now
something warmer
seeps
from that dour-clawed world to my own.

The book concludes with “Beads” (29), a talisman poem which sets its own continuities. It is African indeed, but other tradition is incorporated, as San head-beads, prehistoric (or ahistorical) “charms against night” are also seen as “a rosary”. Charms against the darkness. A good idea in contemporary South Africa, and perhaps anywhere in the world in these times:

When the hyaena comes snuffling
this odd string ground in my head
keeps him wary:
tokens that I've been here and kept trying,
charms against night,
a rosary.

The diminuendo of the conclusion, its typographical scaling down, brings finality and peace. But it is the fourth line which complicates what might otherwise seem the drawing of obvious connections: “tokens that I’ve been here and kept trying”. Here is human presence and effort of the type found throughout this book, the verities of honest existence which (in a typical Morrissey shift) imbue string and rosary with much more than their simple syllables (sapped by anthropology and religion) can say.

Works cited


2 Family. 2.1 Postmarital Residence Patterns. 2.2 Types of Families. 2.2.1 Family Types. Postmarital Residence Patterns. One thing that may help define a family is their place of residence after the parents are married. There are several types of residence patterns. As a noun, marriage is the state of being married. As an adjective, postmarital is after marriage. Other Comparisons: What's the difference? * Michael Weisenberg, The Official Dictionary of Poker (2000, MGI/Mike Caro University, ISBN 978-1880069523). Statistics. * postmarital. English. Adjective.